

University of Technology Sydney

The spread of the native macroalga *Caulerpa filiformis*

By

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CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as part of the collaborative doctoral degree and/or fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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Date:

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Preface

This thesis consists of six chapters. Chapters 2 to 5 have been written as separate articles that have either been published, are in review or are in preparation for submission to peer reviewed scientific journals. These papers are included as or close to their published or submitted form, and as a result, some repetition occurs. To prevent unnecessary duplication, with the exception of Chapter 2, a single reference list has been provided at the end of this thesis.

Chapter 2 contributed to an article that has been published in *Marine and Freshwater Research* 66(11) 1018-1026 (2015). This article is inserted in the thesis in the same format as how it has been published. The rest of this work is in submission to *Marine and Environmental Research*.

The second study of this chapter, “Habitat associations of a range expanding native alga across its geographic range”, has been submitted to *Marine Environmental Research*. Authors of this manuscript are Sofie Voerman, Tim Glasby, William Gladstone and Paul Gribben. S. Voerman conducted all the experimental work and analysis and wrote the manuscript, T. Glasby, W. Gladstone and P. Gribben provided conceptual advice and guidance. Chapters 3-5 are in preparation for submission to scientific journals. Author contributions are as described above. Chapter 2 received contribution from Sam Burrell, who helped with the laboratory work.

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|-------------|
| Acknowledgements..... | I |
| Preface..... | III |
| Table of Contents | V |
| List of Figures..... | IX |
| List of Tables | XIII |
| Abstract..... | XV |
| Chapter 1 General Introduction | 1 |
| 1.1 Research scope | 3 |
| 1.2 Native species as invaders..... | 6 |
| 1.3 Mechanisms underpinning the spread of invasive species | 9 |
| 1.4 <i>Caulerpa filiformis</i> as a native invader | 16 |
| 1.5 General aims | 20 |
| Chapter 2 Habitat associations of <i>C. filiformis</i> across multiple spatial scales..... | 23 |
| Part I) Range and habitat associations of the native macroalga <i>Caulerpa filiformis</i> in New South Wales, Australia | 25 |
| Part II) Local scale habitat associations across <i>C. filiformis</i> geographic range | 27 |

| | |
|--|-----------|
| 2.1 Abstract | 29 |
| 2.2 Introduction | 31 |
| 2.3 Materials and Methods | 34 |
| 2.4 Results | 39 |
| 2.5 Discussion | 47 |
| Appendix 2 | 55 |
| Chapter 3 Mechanisms behind the recruitment success of <i>C. filiformis</i> | 57 |
| 3.1 Abstract | 59 |
| 3.2 Introduction | 61 |
| 3.3 Materials and methods | 64 |
| 3.4 Results | 75 |
| 3.5 Discussion | 84 |
| Appendix 3 | 91 |
| Chapter 4 Morphological variation, tolerance and plasticity to sediment disturbance | 93 |
| 4.1 Abstract | 95 |
| 4.2 Introduction | 97 |
| 4.3 Materials and methods | 102 |

| | |
|--|------------|
| 4.4 Results | 111 |
| 4.5 Discussion | 119 |
| Chapter 5 The roles of nutrient disturbance ad neighbouring habitat in <i>C. filiformis</i> post-recruitment spread | 125 |
| 5.1 Abstract | 127 |
| 5.2 Introduction | 129 |
| 5.3 Materials and methods | 134 |
| 5.4 Results | 142 |
| 5.5 Discussion | 150 |
| Chapter 6 General Discussion | 157 |
| 6.1 Native invaders and <i>C. filiformis</i> | 159 |
| 6.2 Historical and contemporary drivers of <i>C. filiformis</i> spread | 159 |
| 6.3 Linking recruitment to established beds | 164 |
| 6.4 <i>C. filiformis</i> – a passenger or driver of ecological change? | 168 |
| 6.5 Conclusion | 170 |
| 6.6 Conservation issues: problems and solutions and further research | 173 |
| Bibliography | 183 |

List of Figures

| | |
|---|----|
| Fig. 1. 1. Schematic overview of processes affecting an invader's abundance | 15 |
| Fig. 1. 2. a) Detail of <i>C. filiformis</i> patch at Kingsley Beach (32°47'17.29"S; 152° 6'15.41"E) and B) Example of <i>C. filiformis</i> patch indicated by the white dotted contour at Towradgi, NSW, Australia (34°23'8.51"S; 150°55'4.14"E). | 17 |
| Fig. 2.1. Location of sampling sites in NSW, Australia (inset) | 35 |
| Fig. 2. 2. Mean percent (\pm SE) cover of <i>Caulerpa filiformis</i> (left y-axis) on different Substrata (below panels) (r+s, rock, turf and sand) at different Sites (above panels) | 40 |
| Fig. 2. 3. Partial-regression plots of relationship between A) Reef width, B) Depth, C) Surface slope, D) Distance from shore, E) Surface rugosity and <i>C. filiformis</i> cover. | 42 |
| Fig. 2. 4. Mean (\pm SE) richness of the macroalgal community (excluding <i>C. filiformis</i>) per Substrate (below panel) per Site (above panel). | 44 |
| Fig. 3. 1. Map of 6 sampling sites and study site Malabar, NSW, Australia (inset) | 66 |
| Fig. 3. 2. Associations between adult <i>Caulerpa</i> cover (%) of entire reef area investigated and recruit' density (individuals/m ²) on the available rocky reef investigated at a site | 75 |
| Fig. 3. 3. Observed (bars) and expected (white line) density (left y-axis) of recruits per Substrate per Site..... | 76 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Fig. 3. 4. Attachment success of fragments per Substrate at different days from the start of the experiment as proportion of the initial addition of fragments. Results are shown for Simple (A) and Complex (B) fragments for days 2-4 due to a significant Complexity * Substrate interaction during this period (see Table 3.2) (n = 5)..... | 78 |
| Fig. 3. 5. Attachment strength (N) (\pm SE) per Substrate pooled across Complexity | 81 |
| Fig. 3. 6. Fragment retention success (\pm SE) per Substrate at different days | 84 |
| Fig. 4. 1. Schematic representation indicating the two branching morphotypes (Y-branching and Secondary branching) of <i>C. filiformis</i> fronds..... | 104 |
| Fig. 4. 2. Location of sampling sites in NSW, Australia (inset) | 106 |
| Fig. 4. 3. Added variables plots for linear models investigating the relationship between environmental variables and each morphological characteristic (rows) investigated.. | 115 |
| Fig. 4. 4. Mean (\pm SE) (n = 4) A) frond length (cm), B) growth secondary branching (count), C) density of secondary branching (branching cm ⁻¹ blade) and D) stolon length (cm) per sedimentation treatment..... | 118 |
| Fig. 5. 2. Examples of <i>C. filiformis</i> patch bordering with kelp habitat at t = 0 at Wollongong..... | 140 |
| Fig. 5. 3. Sediment pore water nutrient availability (\pm SE) across sediment types. A) total Nitrogen and B) Orthophosphate concentrations..... | 145 |
| Fig. 5. 4. Growth responses (\pm SE) of <i>C. filiformis</i> to different substrata (n = 5). A) Average final dry weight; B) average change in wet weight between the start and | |

| | |
|---|-----|
| the end of the experiment (6 week period); C) tissue N and D) tissue P concentrations. | 146 |
| Fig. 5. 5. Tissue A) C:N and B) C:P ratio (\pm SE) per sediment treatment (n = 5)..... | 147 |
| Fig. 5. 6. Horizontal movement (\pm SE) of <i>C. filiformis</i> from marked borders into neighbouring habitats. Positive values indicate expansion, negative values indicate retreat since the start of the experiment. | 149 |
| Fig. 6. 1. Schematic overview of the processes affecting <i>C. filiformis</i> abundance found in this study | 171 |

List of Tables

| | |
|---|-----|
| Table 2. 1. Results of PERMANOVA tests performed to evaluate how A) the cover of <i>Caulerpa filiformis</i> varied with Site, Substrate and their interaction based on a Euclidean distance matrix and how B) community (excl. <i>C. filiformis</i>) structure and C) community morpho-functional richness (excl. <i>C. filiformis</i>) differed among levels of <i>C. filiformis</i> presence, Site, Substrate and their interactions based on a BC and Euclidean distance matrix, respectively..... | 41 |
| Table 2. 2. Modelled relationships between environmental variables (reef width, depth, surface slope, distance from shore and surface rugosity) and <i>C. filiformis</i> cover. . | 43 |
| Table 2. 3. Morpho-functional group contributions to differences between samples with or without <i>C. filiformis</i> present as identified by SIMPER analyses per Substrate per Site..... | 46 |
| Table 3. 1. Main substrata encountered when surveying for <i>C. filiformis</i> recruits. | 68 |
| Table 3. 2. ANOVA (type II) test results of main effects (factors Substrate and Complexity) on attachment success of fragments based on a Bias reduced GLM. . | 80 |
| Table 3. 3. ANOVA (type II) results for differences in fragment characteristics among levels of Complexity (2 levels), Substrate (7 levels) and their interaction (n = 5) . | 82 |
| Table 4. 1. Summary description of morphological characteristics and abbreviations analysed for field and experimental study. | 108 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Table 4. 2. Modelled relationships between environmental variables (sand, depth and latitude) and different morphological characteristics investigated. | 112 |
| Table 4. 3. ANOVA test results for differences in morphological characteristics between sedimentation treatments..... | 117 |
| Table 5. 1. ANOVA test results for differences in <i>C. filiformis</i> growth, sediment porewater- and water- nutrient concentrations between treatments..... | 143 |
| Table 6. 1. Overview of publications and major findings regarding the spread of <i>Caulerpa filiformis</i> | 176 |

Abstract

Marine coastal systems are threatened by a wide range of anthropogenic pressures. Of particular concern are increased sediment and nutrient runoff. Moreover, hotspots of anthropogenic pressures are also where invasive species tend to be. The spread of invaders can directly translate to a loss of biodiversity and associated ecosystem services. There is a growing awareness that the spread of native species can have similar large impacts on biodiversity and ecosystem function to their famous non-native counterpart. Yet the how, when and why a native species transitions to a ‘native-invader’ (*sensu* Simberloff and Rejmánek 2010) are poorly known. This is especially true in the marine environment. In New South Wales (NSW), eastern Australia, a native green macroalga from the notorious *Caulerpa* genus, *C. filiformis*, has spread both inside and outside its native range.

This study investigated the mechanisms that may have promoted the success of *C. filiformis*. The main aims were to increase our understanding on why this species has become so abundant, the habitat associations of the alga across large and local spatial scales, and the potential impacts on the seaweed community. In Chapter 2, large scale surveys showed that adult population abundance was related to sedimentation at multiple spatial scales, such as Reef Beach Index (RBI), reef width and the presence of a sediment veneer on top of the rocky reef (r+s habitat). In contrast, a low association with turf habitat was found, which is opposite to the observations for several other

Caulerpa invaders. A model was proposed where the adult association with r+s represents an end stage of succession after outcompeting turfing alga. Moreover, it was shown that the seaweed community showed reduced morpho-functional richness in presence of *C. filiformis*. To test the proposed model, habitat association of the recruitment stage was investigated in Chapter 3. Surveys at several locations throughout the alga's distribution showed that *C. filiformis*' recruit abundance was found to be high on turfing algae habitat and not on r+s habitat. This positive association of the recruitment stage was observed for coralline forms of turfing alga, but not for filamentous forms. Those results support the model hypothesized. Additionally, the mechanisms behind this positive association were further explored in this chapter. A laboratory experiment revealed that the high association of *C. filiformis*' recruits with coralline alga was explained by the increased attachment performance of *C. filiformis* fragments on this substrate. Namely, the increased structural complexity of coralline alga aided in rapid and strong attachment of fragments.

Finally, mechanisms that may benefit post-recruitment processes of *C. filiformis*, and in particular the role of turf habitat, were investigated. With the use of long term field observations in Chapter 5, it was shown that established *Caulerpa* appears a poor competitor, and possibly requires further disturbance to spread. For example, a laboratory experiment showed that *C. filiformis* is highly tolerant to large sedimentation rates, aided by rapid morphological plasticity (Chapter 4). This may benefit the alga indirectly if sediment more negatively affects competitors. Moreover, increased

sediment-nutrient availability was shown to promote growth rates, benefitting the alga's competitive strength (Chapter 5).

Overall, my thesis indicates that disturbance to native macrophytes indirectly promotes recruitment success by promoting turf habitat and that its continued spread is reliant on further disturbance to native communities – a model that has been demonstrated to invasive marine algae but not previously for a rapidly spreading native alga.

